

Mr ANDREW YOUNG CRAWFORD -- IMMORTAL MEMORY

Mr. Andrew Young Crawford, the president of the Tam o' Shanter Burns Club, Ayr, and a former Ayr magistrate, was the guest of honour at the sixty—sixth anniversary dinner of the Dumfries Burns Hoff Club, which was held in the Globe Ian, Dumfries, on Monday, 25th January, 1954.

Mr Crawford, submitting the toast of "The Immortal Memory" in an impressive address, referred to the ethics of Burns' life and his genius. To try to realise the greatness of Burns, they had to remember that, at this time in nearly every city, town, village and hamlet in Scotland and in places throughout the world where Scotsmen were to be found, similar gatherings were being held. They commemorated their National Bard on account of his patriotism and love of his country. The patriotism of Burns amounted to a passion.

"O Scotia: my dear, my native soil:

For whom my warmest wish to Heaven is sent,

Long may thy hardy sons of rustic toil

Be blest with health, and peace, and sweet content!"

He not only wrote and spoke of his motherland, but, like the Tuscan of old, he was prepared if need be to gird on his good sword and go to man the war."

"Wha for Scotland's king and law

Freedom's sword will strongly draw,

Freeman stand, or freeman fa',

Let him follow me!"

More than that they loved Burns for his labours on behalf of the county of his birth. He complained that the Tay, Forth, Ettrick and Tweed had all been immortal—ised, while the Ayr, Doon, Irvine and other Ayrshire rivers had been neglected. Burns did not neglect them, and the world had not neglected them since. The banks and braes o' Bonnie Doon bloomed for the whole world now. His poems were descript—ive of Scottish life:—

"From scenes like these old Scotia's grandeur springs, That makes her lov'd at home, rever'd abroad."

With due allowance to Hamilton, Ramsey and Fergusson, the precursors and teachers whom Burns gratefully acknowledged, it was left to Burns and to him alone to raise the Scottish dialect to a level with the literary tongue. In fact, not only did the Poet place the Scottish language in front of English literature, but he practically saved it from extinction.

They commemorated him for noble independence went on Mr. Crawford. Burns had stated that he scorned to fear the face of any man living. Deception had no place in his character. If Burns had been a trimmer he could greatly have improved his worldly prospects. He lived in a time when the masses were taught to consider the classes as superior specimens of humanity, and land—owners were looked upon as "wee Gods." To say anything against the laird then was practically to commit financial and social suicide. Burns, by his immortal poem of "A Man's a Man for a' that" gave the poor man a feeling of independence he had never dared to feel before. He showed him that honest poverty was nothing to be ashamed of, although for years and years afterwards many a man was imprisoned for it.

"Is there for honest Poverty

That hings his head, and a' that?

The coward-slave, we pass him by,

We dare be poor for a' that:"

He made the most down-trodden feel that life was worth living when he said:- "The honest man, tho' e'er, sae poor,
Is king o' men for a' that:"

In an early letter he showed the stuff he was made of, when he wrote:- "If I could I would wipe all tears from all eyes," and in his common-place book he declared his unbounded goodwill to every creature rational or irrational. Burns' sympathetic heart did not stop at human beings. Even the sight of a wounded hare touched a tender chord. Turning up a mouse with the plough opened the flood-gates of his pity; crushing a daisy was distasteful to him. He had even a kindly feeling and word for the De'il:-

"But fare-you-weel, auld "Nickle-Ben:"

O wad ye tak' a thought an' men'!

Ye aiblins might - I dinna ken -

Still hae a stake:

I'm wae to think upo' you den,

Ev'n for your sake:"

And to crown all, his immortal lines on the brotherhood of man made him worthy to be canonised by his loving and admiring countrymen:-

"For a' that, and a' that,

It's coming yet for a' that,

That Man to Man, the world o'er,

Shall brothers be for a' that:"

They also commemorated Burns for his genius, said Mr. Crawford. He was the poetic genius of his country. Where everything in the

garden was lovely, how was it possible to single out special brilliance? What might appear specially good to one man might not appeal in the same way to another.

Compared with other poets, Burns was to his mind like the work of nature in comparison with the handicraft of art. He thought they were all agreed that his description of the vanity of earthly pleasures had never been surpassed:-

"But pleasures are like poppies spread,

You seize the flow'r, its bloom is shed;

Or like the snow falls in the river,

A moment white - then melts for ever;

Or like the borealis race

That flit ere you can point their place;

Or like the rainbow's lovely form

Evanishing amid the storm."

His word painting of the repulsive — his chamber of horrors — had, to Mr. Crawford's mind, never been approached, not even by Dante's "Inferno".

"Coffins stood round, like open presses,

That shaw'd the dead in their last dresses."

Mr. Crawford went on to say that it should be borne in mind that Burns' knowledge was acquired by a man whose schooldays amounted to only

two years, six months, and three weeks, plus the education he received from his

father. That was the education of what was commonly supposed to be the uneducated ploughman peer. It went to prove that there was no royal road to learning. Some

wise—acres said that Burns was a copier of Ramsay, Fergusson and many other poetical predecessors. He' was no more a copier than Turner in his brilliant

landscapes, or Wilkie in his most minute interior, or even James Watt and his engine.

Like all human Turners, Wilkies and Watts, Burns had to learn his profession or trade, and he was bound to have a teacher. He gave his poetic teachers all credit and

honour, but, like many a man before and after him, the pupil came to beat the master, and that was the relation, in which Burns stood to his poetic predecessors.

No man had the searchlight of the world flashed so fiercely upon him as Robert Burns, Mr. Crawford said. All his private correspondence was published and examined after death; every word said was reproduced; and every deed described in cold, black print, and critically scrutinised. The public were no fools. They would sooner or later find out the truth. To continue in their goodwill and admiration for nearly two centuries, with every appearance of lasting many more, proved up to the hilt that, despite the Henley school of critics and would-be purists, Robert Burns was a good man, a kind man, a true and a great man. In short, he was a king among men.

"Let us look for a moment on the state of our country at the time of Burns," said Mr. Crawford. "Female servants went bare-footed and were paid at the rate of 26s 8d a year and two aprons. Cloth was nearly all home-made; farmers built their own houses, as Burns did at Ellisland; slavery was still in full swing in America, in the West Indies, and in our own land of freedom it was not extinguished. Colliers and salters were bound not to offer their services elsewhere than in the mines, where their parents worked, and along with which they were bound and sold. It was criminal for workmen to combine to consider their wages or hours. A man could be hanged who shot a rabbit, stole a bleachfield, or pilfered goods to the value of five shillings. Public whipping and stocks were still an institution. Only the favoured gentry had a vote and Parliamentary speeches were not allowed to be reported. Critics of the poet forgot all that, and referred to how Burns ought to have lived. He would like to tell them that, considering his environment, the mystery was how he lived as well as he did. He was a true child of his time in his own estimate."

"The poor inhabitant below
Was quick to learn and wise to know,
And keenly felt the friendly glow,
And softer flame;
But thoughtless follies laid him low,
And stain'd his name!"

That was the gist of his whole life. He was not a dissolute man, he was a social man, and could only be found round the flowing bowl. He was no solitary toper. He had a delicate constitution, and very little affected him. He was frugal, exemplary and regular when in the Excise. Although a little tight for money at the last, he was far from insolvent. How much did it not add to his country's shame that, possessing a man of genius, whose loss could never be replaced, who could live long by an exceedingly temperate life, she allowed him to sink into an exciseman? Why was he not placed in a situation away from temptation, where he might have had the comforts of life, the refinements of society, and the pursuits of literature? Had he been removed from temptation, his ambition would not have been hard to satisfy. To take it at his own words, he wanted only "A life of literary leisure, with a decent competence, is the summit of my wishes." And what could be more touching than his estimate of happiness:—

"To make a happy fireside clime
To weans and wife —
That's the true pathos and sublime
Of human life."

Those were regrets they all felt, but if Burns was not appreciated, he certainly felt the time would come when lie would be. "They'll think mair o' me a hundred years hence,

Jean," was one of his last expressions. Mr. Crawford was proud to say that his prediction had come true.